

A Christmas Parable

Ch1

Maria awoke with a start. That had been one strange night's sleep. It's true, she'd been working hard for her GCSEs at St Faith's Catholic Comprehensive in Bolton, and had been sleeping fitfully for weeks. But this was something else. Those dreams – what were they? At first she thought it had just been like an episode of *Supernatural*. She'd watched that series so often, lots of her dreams had various ethereal figures in them. But this time she was sure she'd seen, well, maybe an *angel*: it was so vivid, she felt she could reach across and touch him. He didn't look like an angel though – he wasn't wearing a white dress or had wings or anything like that. But there was something about him. Something pure, something terrifying. All very odd.

But what he had said was even odder. Something about having a baby, a special baby from God. That sort of thing happens all the time in the sorts of TV shows she watched, but she'd never *dreamed* that sort of thing before. She was so shocked she'd found herself saying to this angel that it was all cool, if that's what was going to happen. It might even get her out of GCSEs. Now, waking up, she felt different, clean in some way. But she was still sure it was just a dream.

Either way, she was hungrier than she'd been for weeks. Maria had battled with anorexia on and off for a while. Even though her boyfriend Joe told her she looked beautiful, she saw all those stick-thin models and hated herself. But she still prayed every night: the Lord's Prayer and prayers of blessing for her family. She also prayed for those thoughts about herself to go away, to see that she was special again. It's funny, even though she hadn't been to Mass for ages, she now felt determined to go this Sunday. She'd even call Joe and tell him to go too. Joe came from a devout family, much more so than hers, and that made him popular with her parents. Still, he tried to avoid going if he could. Better to be out on Saturday night, he reckoned, than on Sunday morning. But you know what, this Sunday she *would* go. She needed help with her exams, and even with all her doubts and questions, deep down she still felt that God was someone who loved her, and that maybe, everything would be OK.

But enough of these questions, time to get the bus to school! Looks like rain again...

Ch2

Joe sat there on the edge of his bed, his head in his hands. What was he going to do now? Nobody believed him. He might have gone off the rails a little bit recently, he might not have gone to Mass as often as he meant to, and he and Maria had always wanted to, you know, but they never had. Never. Whatever else he was, Joe knew what was right and what was wrong, and Maria had always felt the same. Let's wait till we're a bit older, let's wait till we get married.

But now this! A baby! His mum and dad were furious, that car they'd promised him when he finished his plumbing apprenticeship was definitely off now. Even the local priest almost refused to hear his confession last week when he said he didn't have anything to confess on that front. But the baby wasn't his! He knew that. God knew that – though why God wasn't helping him to clear up this mess was anyone's guess.

But Maria kept saying again and again that she hadn't slept with anyone. It was a miracle. Yeah right... but he loved Maria and always knew when she was lying. She was a hopeless liar. But this time there were none of the little telltale signs, it really looked like she was telling the truth.

What was he going to do? Joe lay back, hands behind head, and drifted off to sleep... He heard voices, sounds, shapes. His eyes fluttered, he was sure he was hearing something, some sort of message for him. Yes, there was some figure in his daydream, looking different, telling him to chill out, that everything would be OK, that this baby really was someone special. Call him Jesus, call him Jesus. Jesus Jesus Je- Joe woke with a start and sat bolt upright on his bed. What was happening to him? First miracles, now strange dreams. But something made him laugh as well: Jesus – yeah, a great name for a Catholic baby!

You know what, he thought to himself – who cares what anyone else thinks? I'm going to help Maria, I'm going to do my bit, I might even marry her – when she reaches 16 of course, which she will a bit later in the year. And if my parents don't like it – well that's their problem, not mine.

Ch3

'Nearly there!' Joe cried out. 'Platform 3, we've got 2 minutes!' Maria lumbered along as fast as she could, but even the walk to the station had made her breathless. The train from Bolton to Manchester Piccadilly had been delayed and now they were rushing to catch the cross country to Birmingham New Street. Then another change down to Reading, and only a vague promise from Joe's erratic brother that he had a spare couch for them to kip on when they got there. What were they *doing*?

They stumbled on to the first carriage, and watched as the doors shut and the train pulled away. Maria was sweating and felt nauseous, but looking up she noticed loads of passengers already standing. Another 4-car train, why did they never run 8 coaches, this close to Christmas? They would have taken the nice train to London, but that was too expensive. Cheapest possible ticket nowadays. The meal after the registry office wedding – the church wouldn't marry her in her 'condition', they said – had cleaned out her and Joe's savings, and her parents had only grudgingly agreed to put down the deposit for the tiny bedsit they were living in. Joe's parents still weren't talking to him, let alone giving him any money.

And now this. Plumbing apprenticeships now all centrally organised from an office in Reading – everyone had to travel there to register for their final year. But why Christmas Eve of all days? Why did the paperwork have to be done before the start of the new year? Joe was working so hard for them both, she had to let him go – but now that meant she had to go as well, 2 weeks from her due date. School was already on hold for a year, but it was the last thing she needed.

An hour and a half later, having stood the whole time in the corridor, her and Joe pulled into New Street station and made their last connection to Reading. But already she was starting to feel strange. Something was happening to the baby, she couldn't explain, but this train had better hurry!

Ch4

The last 2 hours had been the most stressful of her entire life. Worse than telling Joe, worse than telling mum and dad, worse than all those looks in the playground and whispers of 'slut'. Her waters had broken at Banbury, then mild contractions had started as they pulled out of Oxford. An hour in the toilets, trying to stay calm and praying praying praying for the train to reach Reading. Thankfully no hold-ups, but what to do now?

They looked around the waiting area – Joe's brother was nowhere to be seen. Joe started calling frantically: 'where are you?' The brother's mobile was turned off. Maria let out a scream of pain, and Joe hurried her out of the station. He wasn't thinking straight – he knew he should ask someone, but he felt sick, embarrassed, furious with his brother. So he and Maria stumbled along the road, and ducked down a side street: which way to the hospital? Maria screamed again. Oh no, oh no, it's coming. Just ahead of him he saw a garage, A. King Motor services. There was one mechanic, cleaning himself, ready to shut up shop. It was nearly 6pm, everywhere else places were shutting... time was running out. He had no choice. Maria screamed again and the mechanic looked up. 'Oi mate!' Joe shouted out – 'Can you help us – I think my missus is about to have a baby!'

The next few hours passed by in a blur. Joe remembered very little; turns out Mrs King – the mechanic's wife – was a midwife, that was a stroke of luck. Too late to get to the hospital though, they'd stayed in the garage. As the evening wore on, the mechanic had popped out and asked the bouncers working at the nightclub next door to get some towels or something from the club. They'd come in and had a good look. It was funny really, the first guests at a birth. And they too were saying odd things about hearing singing, and meeting angels and stuff. A few months ago, Joe would have put it down to having too much to drink on Christmas eve, maybe mistaking a hen do for singing angels. But now... well, he figured this stuff just happened to them. Dunno why, but it did.

All the fuss with the bouncers then got spotted by a crowd of tourists from Japan, and they came in as well. That was funny too, a strange hush fell on them and they almost seemed to be worshipping the baby. One of them spoke a bit of English and said it was their custom to give gifts at a birth – most gave some money, but two gifts were really odd. One gave him some prayer sticks, told Joe to burn them and they would give off a lovely smell. The final tourist took a bracelet off his wrist: on it was a little samurai sword. He mumbled something really odd about suffering to conquer, or something... and that was that. They disappeared too. And now it was just him, Maria and their little baby Jesus lying in a box of cleaning cloths. Still no sign of his brother, though. And who knows how he would explain this to his college? He looked at his mobile: he had a text from one of the tourists. It was a picture of them – of Jesus in the box – underneath the mechanic's sign: A. King. And he had a funny sense that everything would be alright, somehow or other.

That all sounds a bit far-fetched, doesn't it? That could never happen....

But it did, didn't it?

In another culture, long ago – but if you had been living in the village in Nazareth, what would you have thought of the teenage girl with a fanciful story? If you had been in Bethlehem, how would you have felt when the local toughs – and not the respectable establishment figures – got the entry passes to the royal birth? If you had been in Jerusalem when the Wise Men visited, would you have believed them or sided with Herod?

What does it look like when God breaks into our world? Nowadays we see the figures of the nativity as exotic, almost mythical people. If the past is a foreign country, the ancient past is positively alien. But what's striking about so much of the nativity is its ordinariness. A teenage pregnancy, a doubting fiancée, a respectable tradesman, a government obsessed with tax revenue, a tiresome journey, trouble with hotel bookings. It's *our* world isn't it? It's Bolton and Reading and plumbing apprenticeships and difficult families.

But look again and see the piercing shafts of the extraordinary. The dreams and apparitions, the fragile teenage romance which holds together, the fact that God's story largely excludes or minimises the role of the obvious people – the powerful, respectable people – and uses the last and the least, even Gentile astrologers. Too strange to be true? Or so strange, so extraordinary, it has to be true. Only God could pull this off, surely?

The word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.